

Normally You Can't Escape Stock; Now It's Hard To Get A Look At 'Em

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Page 8

MERTZON — Rain is ruining the Shortgrass Country. No sooner do we recover from one wet siege until another soaker comes along and disrupts everything. Each day our situation becomes more critical.

The most immediate problem is the livestock. Proven herds of trough-trained cattle and reputation strings of sack-broke sheep have returned to living off range forage. In previous years we could have garnished a feed sack with a few grams of cottonseed meal, tootled a pickup horn about twice, and obtained a livestock census on any size ranch in these parts. But that wouldn't work under present conditions.

In spring seasons like that of last year, a herder supported by a coffee can half full of range cubes could have lead the entire bovine population off the Continental Shelf. Forty pounds of shelled corn would have been enough to gather all the sheep. If the wind had been just right to carry the odor, a sack of baby chick starter would have been sufficient to set off a migration of bawling herds that would have made the Pied Piper of Hamlin ashamed of his rat gathering technique.

Today it's a different matter. The old cows still glance up at a passing pickup, but they no longer stampede toward every moving vehicle. The ungrateful old ewes, after trying to die all winter, tear off the brush at the mere sight of a man or the sound of a pickup.

With cowboys as scared as experienced river boat navigators, it's foolish to allow livestock to become independent of the sack and the horn. Once the lush green forage takes effect, hard horseback rides, deep tracks, and thin residue are going to be the order of the day. Bunkhouse breakfast will begin earlier. And instead of watching the Lucy show at night, some of us are likely to be getting a saddlehorn view of the evening star.

A time or two in the past we got to stop feeding in the spring. Talk about trouble! The UN executive committee couldn't have solved the side effects of our smallest problems.

Everything went wrong. Sheep suffered from screwworms on the outside and wasted away from internal parasites attacking from within. Record breaking dew poison viruses were cycling every 24 hours, and the horn flies were so fierce that the old cows wore big bald places in the switches of their tails. If a man had to spend the night in town, he couldn't get a minute's rest for the old ranchers and the livestock bankers moaning in their sleep. (To be honest, bankers and retired ranchers are extremely sensitive to any type of disaster. They have nightmares over drouths and market failures. In fact, almost anything upsets these two categories of citizens.)

Worst of all was how wild the stock became. Every four-legged animal from the milkpen calves to mother cows was as outlawed as an unbroke honky tonk girl. Throughout the spring, the only part of a cow brute or a woolie to be seen by the human eye was a tail disappearing in the brush. It wasn't like a revival of the Old West, but one thing for sure, collecting stock was more inconvenient than bating them into the pens with a handful of cake.

My fellow ranchers may be sorry they got to quit buying feed this spring. Horseshoes and leather cost a lot of money, too. What we've saved on feed and pickup expense won't be significant when it's seen how badly the livestock is scattered. However, money has always corrupted my people's judgment, and the past 25 years of hard times has tended to turn a lot of them into misers.